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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR KPKO MARR MCAP MOPS PP FJ
SUBJECT: PNG DEFENSE FORCE COMMANDER PREDICTS PASSAGE OF PEACEKEEPING
BILL; EXPRESSES CONCERNS ABOUT FIJI

CLASSIFIED BY: Leslie V. Rowe, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Port
Moresby, U.S. Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: Papua New Guinea (PNG) Defence Force Commander Ilau told Ambassador April 15 there is now agreement within the Government on introduction and passage of the International Obligations Bill allowing PNG armed forces to participate in international peacekeeping operations. Secretary Clinton's discussions with FM Abal last week encouraged the Government to move ahead. Parliament is expected to take it up May 12. Ilau expressed interest in sending a small number of PNG troops to Afghanistan and East Timor, but ruled out Iraq and areas involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ilau expressed concern with developments in Fiji following a five-hour conversation with Caretaker PM Frank Bainimarama when he transited Port Moresby recently. He lamented that Bainimarama appears to want to "solve all Fiji's problems, including corruption" before he steps down. Ilau has urged neighboring countries such as New Zealand to attempt to engage Fiji in "the regional family" through non-directed, one-on-one "Melanesian style" conversations. End Summary.

Clinton-Abal Conversation Advances Peacekeeping Bill

¶2. (C) PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) Commander Peter Ilau told the Ambassador April 15 that the International Obligations Bill will be considered by Parliament May 12. When approved, the Bill will allow PNG to participate in international peacekeeping efforts. Ilau said FM Abal and PM Somare decided to push for passage after Abal's conversation with Secretary Clinton in Washington last week. He said Defence Minister Dadae, who had been cool to the passage of the Bill, now also supports the measure. Abal, as PNG's most senior minister, will lead the effort for passage.

¶3. (C) Ilau expressed confidence that the issue of compensation for troops killed in action would not impede passage of the Act. PNG Highlands tribes, as well as some coastal peoples, insist on compensation for families or clans when one of their members is killed. The issue of compensation has been a sticking point in progress on the bill; in fact, he conceded, it remains sensitive. Ilau said he had advised the Government to make clear to the public that families of those killed would receive proper remuneration. He said he would enlist the local media in getting the word out on the Bill to ensure public support. He said he would invite UN security officials resident in Port

Moresby to participate in a radio call-in show to help explain UN insurance and benefits for survivors of those killed in action.

Willing to Serve in East Timor, Possibly Afghanistan

¶ 14. (C) Ilau said the Act would not only allow PNG troops to participate in UN peacekeeping efforts, but also in U.S. or Australian-led efforts. He reiterated his earlier caution to us that PNG would not want to participate in Iraq or in peacekeeping efforts related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but would be willing to send a platoon to Afghanistan. He said PNG would "certainly" be willing to contribute forces to peacekeeping in East Timor, perhaps one or two companies; he quoted an Australian general who told him that "the quality that PNG forces have shown in the Solomons would be much appreciated in East Timor." (Note: PNG police and military forces participate in the Australian led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) under the Pacific Island Nations Treaty.) Ilau added that total numbers devoted to overseas peacekeeping would have to be rather small, with specific skills.

¶ 15. (C) Ilau said that, upon passage of the Bill, he would seek to place a Defense Advisor at the PNG UN Representative's Office in New York as well as a Defense Attaché at the PNG Embassy in Washington.

Concerns about Fiji, Bainimarama

¶ 16. (C) Ilau expressed concern about the situation in Fiji. He lamented that Fiji Caretaker Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama "has the view that he can fix all of Fiji's problems by himself, including corruption." Ilau recently spent five hours in conversation with Bainimarama at the airport as the Fijian was returning from India. "He seems hellbent on eradicating corruption before calling elections and returning Fiji to a normal system," Ilau added. Ilau said he joked to Bainimarama that as long as Fiji remains in its current status, "we can't even play rugby with you." "Yes," he said Bainimarama responded, "and I'm catching hell from my troops for it."

¶ 17. (C) Ilau suggested Bainimarama resign and move away (but, he asked rhetorically, to where?). He said the Fiji Prime Minister intends to use his time in power to "get rid of some people in politics and business" whom he associates with corruption. Ilau opined that Bainimarama needs to learn that "there are some things in life you can never fix, you can only contain."

A Need for Engagement, Conversation "In the Pacific Way"

¶ 18. (C) Ilau said that on a recent visit to New Zealand, he told NZ officials there is a need for neighboring countries to work out a way to engage Fiji regionally, to give the country a sense of being part of a larger regional family. He urged New Zealand and other Pacific countries to sit down with Bainimarama and "find out what he really wants," expressing concern with Fiji's growing relations with "outside" countries such as India and China. He said PNG PM Somare had tried to engage Fiji "in the Pacific way," even providing financial assistance for elections and flood relief, but without success. (In an aside, he defined "the Pacific way" as "two people sitting down to talk informally, not advertising an agenda"; better, he said, "to conceal any underlying agenda or to not have one in the first place.")

¶ 19. (C) Ilau said chances are poor that Bainimarama will attend the Pacific Island Forum scheduled for May in Australia. He added that "we should not treat him as a bad boy," but rather listen to his concerns as a way of bringing Fiji back to full democracy.

Comment: A Need for More U.S. Military Engagement with PNG?

¶ 10. (C) We were encouraged to learn the Government now intends

to move ahead on the International Obligations Bill. PNG has a positive contribution to make to international peacekeeping efforts. If the Bill passes and PNG follows through on Ilau's plans to station military officers in New York and Washington, it will correspondingly increase our need for military liaison in Port Moresby, perhaps to include opening a Defense Attaché Office at the Embassy.

ROWE